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AUTHOR	Brown, Bettina Lankard
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ABSTRACT

According to the school-to-work (STW) program philosophy, STW efforts should be comprehensive and begin as early as preschool. At the elementary school level, the developmental process of career education begins with career awareness designed to broaden student knowledge about careers and connect academic learning to the workplace. Developing basic, academic, and employability skills represents another major component of students' STW education that, when linked with career awareness, provides a strong foundation for a successful STW system. The main challenge for elementary school teachers teaching STW is to create an environment where students see the connection between school learning and the real world. Strategies for making this connection include the following: student-centered teaching, contextual teaching and learning experiences, and collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities. Integrating curriculum across subjects and establishing business-community partnerships are two of the most common practices for promoting STW connections at the elementary school level. These practices must be incorporated into a broader school vision for STW that includes the following: (1) carefully selected community partners; (2) curriculum aligned with the STW mission; (3) adequate financial resources; (4) linking of academics and careers; (5) professional development of staff; and (6) building on existing school strengths. Successful STW programs are described. (Contains 12 references) (MN)

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Bettina Lankard Brown

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Bettina Lankard Brown

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School-to-Work and Elementary Education

School-to-work (STW) programs have become a priority at the secondary level and beyond, where students are intent upon choosing their path to work and/or further education. However, the STW philosophy stresses that STW efforts should be comprehensive, beginning as early as preschool. This Brief describes what is happening in STW at the elementary school level and provides examples of implementation strategies that give younger students the solid foundation they need to make informed educational and career choices when they are older.

Career Education as a Vital Part of STW

Career education is a developmental process through which students are led to connect education with lifelong work. "It supports and advances—

- basic, academic, and employability skills;
- career awareness, exploration, and decision making;
- career and work emphases in classrooms and throughout education;
- private sector-education partnerships;
- relationships of education and work, and informed choice;
- nonbias, nonstereotyping, and freedom of career choice; and
- work as a meaningful part of a total lifestyle." (Katzman 1995, p. 8)

At the elementary school level, this developmental process begins with career awareness, which is initiated to broaden student knowledge about careers and connect academic learning to the workplace. It establishes school as a foundation for education and workplace connections and requires community involvement and support (Oklahoma School-to-Work System 1996).

Because young children come to school with preconceived ideas of work based on their youthful observations, experiences, and imaginations, an elementary-level STW program serves to expose these students to a broad range of careers in the real world and occupations that may be unfamiliar to them and/or nontraditional for their gender, race, or ethnicity. Career awareness activities such as career talks from community members, career fair days, and workplace tours of local businesses and industries are several strategies that can be used to expand career awareness (*School-to-Work in Elementary Schools* 1997).

The Focus on Skill Development

Developing basic, academic, and employability skills represents another major component of students' STW education, one that, when linked with career awareness, provides a strong foundation for a successful school-to-work system (Padilla 1997). The elementary grades offer an opportune time to integrate academic and career-related skills into the school curriculum (Bouchillon 1996). For example, learning activities can be introduced to help students become aware of how workers use basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, along with mathematics and science to perform their jobs. Problem-solving activities can be used to help students develop thinking skills such as creativity, decision making, problem solving, visualization, reflection, and reasoning. Collaborative activities can help to build personal qualities such as responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity.

STW Connection through Instructional Practices

Creating an environment where students see the connection between school learning and the real world is the main STW challenge for elementary school teachers. New ways of teaching and learning that place learning in an authentic environment and draw upon contributions from parents, businesses, industry, and community members offer a sound basis for connecting school to work. For example:

- Student-centered teaching practices engage students in experiences that are real and of interest to them, and have relevance to their personal lives.

- Contextual teaching and learning experiences–those that situate learning in the context of real life happenings and involve the solution of unstructured problems of the real world—engage students in complex, creative, and higher-order thinking about issues that are relevant to the world in which they live.

- Collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities enable students to learn about teamwork, conflict resolution, diversity, and respect for others, qualities that have significance to their potential for employment.

Although instructional strategies can serve to motivate students by connecting learning to its real-world application, in-depth learning can occur only when the learning climate is supportive of learning—encouraging students to voice their opinions, learn from their mistakes, and respect their own individuality. "Students' learning is enhanced when others see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and accept them as individuals" (Bouchillon 1996, p. 45).

Strategies to Improve Practice

Integrating curriculum across subjects and establishing business-community partnerships are two of the most common practices for promoting school-to-work connections at the elementary school level. Padilla (1997) emphasizes that these practices must be incorporated into a broader school vision for STW that includes (1) careful selection of community partners, (2) thoughtful restructuring of the curriculum to be in line with the STW mission, (3) adequate securing of financial resources (4) linking of academics and careers, (5) professional development of staff, and (6) building on existing school strengths. The following examples of school-to-work practices in elementary schools reflect ways in which educators are incorporating a STW vision in their endeavors to give students an opportunity to see how the skills they are learning in school are used on the job (Bouchillon 1996).

School-Community Partnerships

Thoreau Elementary School in Milwaukee offers students in-school employment opportunities in mini-businesses–e.g., a general store, plant shop, and popcorn. Business partners provide assistance by donating goods and supplies, and providing speakers, tutors, and facilities for worksite visits. The program involves community volunteers, uses multiple teaching and learning strategies, creates a

safe risk-taking environment for student learning, and uses career discovery as its theme (*School to Work in Elementary Schools* 1997).

Norland Elementary School in Dade County, Florida is partnering with a group of radio stations and a national program called Kids and the Power of Work (KAPOW) to provide students with radio broadcasting experiences. Station volunteers and KAPOW staff provide learning experiences that focus on career and occupational awareness, positive work habits, decision making, and overcoming bias and stereotyping (ibid.).

Curriculum Restructuring for Work-Based Learning

Highland Elementary School in Kentucky offers work-based learning through exploration of agricultural careers by sponsoring "A Day on the Farm" (1999) through which students visit a horse farm, dairy operation, catfish farm, greenhouse, pumpkin farm, and apply orchard. The students speak to farmers about the opportunities and challenges of agricultural careers and explore agricultural production.

Worchester Central School in New York offers an example of integrated curriculum for school-based and work-based learning that addresses the issue of conflict resolution in kindergarten and first grade. A workshop on the topic is presented to parents of these young students at the beginning of the school year. Parents are informed about national and state curriculum standards and the connecting activities of the Peacemaking Skills for Little Kids program that is integrated throughout the K-1 curriculum ("Worchester Central School" 1999).

Integration of Academics and Careers

Brodhead Elementary School in Kentucky is expanding its Practical Living curriculum to involve vocational studies through the initiation of a micro-society mall. Fourth- and fifth-grade students operate the mall for which they are paid a weekly salary in "tiger bucks," which apply to attendance, homework, behavior, and job performance credit. Every 2 weeks, students in grades K-5 visit the mall where they may purchase items. The project is supported by donations ("Micro-Society Mall" 1999).

Pioneer Elementary School in the Weber County School District, Utah, is involved in "Educational Cones" established to connect academics and work for elementary, junior high, and high school students. The cones represent collaboration among seven elementary schools, two junior high schools, and one high school. Through its partnership with a local grocery story, Pioneer students in grades one through five participate in learning about grocery store work, e.g., milk-processing; weights and pricing; fractions and measurements; advertising, bookkeeping, and store management; bagging of groceries through "on-the-job" practice; and how to apply and interview for jobs (*Career Development in School-to-Work* 1996; Webster 1997).

Classroom Strategies

Texas Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has developed activity-based curriculum called Real World Connections to "help the teachers and students see the relationship between a course's content and the world of work and also among various courses" (Christ 1995, p. 32). All of the activities lend themselves to scenarios and reflect real world and interdisciplinary connections across subjects (Christ 1995).

At *Joe Walker Middle School* in Quartz Hill, California, one teacher has implemented a unique strategy to motivate students, teach responsibility, and improve student behavior through the use of a time clock. Students punch in and out of class on a time card and are assigned points for time worked in class, which are added to their grades. They receive a weekly time sheet and can be docked wages (points) for violating classroom rules or receive a pay increase (points) by working hard in class. If a student loses his/her time card, that student loses pay for the hours that were recorded on the card. "This school-to-work atmosphere is a great motivation to the lower level and special education students . . . a great way to reinforce self-esteem, along with responsibility and a good work ethic" (Anderson 1997, p. 26).

The website of the National School-to-Work Learning and Information Center (http://www.stw.ed.gov) offers access to other "best practice" examples of school-to-work efforts at the elementary school level. Characteristics that are common to all, however, reflect those noted in the examples cited here: school-community partnerships, curriculum restructuring, integration of academic and career concepts, and instructional practices and curriculum that reflect contextual and collaborative teaching and learning.

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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